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Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of their Middle Schooling Teacher Preparation

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Abstract: The middle schooling movement in Australia has gained momentum in the past 10 to 15 years (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005) with much of the literature recognising that preservice teachers need to graduate with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to engage middle years students (Education Queensland, 2004). This qualitative study analysed the responses of preservice teachers towards their completion of a four-year Bachelor of Education primary degree that included a middle years pathway (or electives). The study aims to investigate the final years' perceptions of their confidence and preparedness to teach in the middle-school context as a result of their university learning. Data were gathered using open-ended one-to-one interviews of approximately 45 minutes duration. Seven of the twenty-two final-year preservice teachers were involved in the study that represented 32% of the cohort. Results indicated the need for increased school-based units, the importance of pedagogical approaches employed by the lecturer and the preference for further linkages between middle school theories and middle school teaching practices. Those who provide teacher education courses need to consider the importance of how they deliver middle years courses as well as the content of the course. Furthermore, teacher education institutions need to evaluate and re-shape their courses to ensure preservice teachers are provided with real-world experiences related to both the literature and the profession.

Keywords: Preservice Teacher, Teacher Preparation, Middle Schooling

PRODUCING QUALITY TEACHERS is a vision shared by teacher education institutions and government bodies alike. This shared vision is driven by research that indicates that quality teaching is the most important factor in changing educational outcomes for students (Nelson, 2002). How best to produce quality teachers who are competent and confident to teach in an ever changing society within the variety of school settings across Australia and internationally is indeed a complex task. Teacher education programs in Australia undergo frequent internal and external reviews and evaluations to ensure their courses are structured so that their graduates meet required standards (Australian Institution for Teaching and School Leadership, 2006). Furthermore, government reports that investigate the nature of teacher education programs provide suggestions as to what constitutes a quality teacher education program (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, 2008; Ramsey, 2000). Themes that emerge from these reports are that teacher education institutions need to make teacher quality a priority and ensure preservice teachers graduate with theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to ensure they are competent and confident in the classroom. In particular, such reports focus upon graduates who can successfully teach literacy and numeracy, embed information technology into their pedagogy and have the skills for life-

long learning to respond to the emergence of current trends and practices in education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Ramsey, 2000).

A trend that has emerged from educational literature in the last ten to fifteen years in Australia is the recognition that adolescence is a significant period in human development requiring particular pedagogical approaches to support and promote learning (Barrat, 1998; Carrington, 2006; Chadbourne, 2001; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, & Mockler, 2007; Luke et. al, 2003; Pendergast, Whitehead, de Jong, Newhouse-Maiden, & Bahr, 2007). In response to the literature, and state and federal imperatives, universities have responded accordingly and created course structures so that preservice teachers may graduate with the skills, knowledge and practices that support and engage early adolescent learners. Universities have responded in different ways with some teacher education courses being devoted to producing middle years' teachers while others have embedded middle years' practices within already existing primary and secondary course structures. The premise is that future adolescents will be taught by teachers who understand their development and are equipped with effective strategies to engage students in the middle years of schooling. As noted in the Top of the Class Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) quality teacher education programs have the potential to "improve the effectiveness of the entire school system" (p. vii).

The middle years of learning in Australia can be referred to as middle-level education, middle phase, middle school, middle grades, and years in the middle (Knipe & Johnstone, 2007; Pendergast, 2005). Nevertheless, adolescence refers to a distinct period of development when young people encounter and experience a series of developmental changes that affect the ways in which they think, act and respond to others (Carrington, 2006). It is alleged that adolescence begins at age 10 and possibly ends at 22 years of age (Bahr, 2005), however, this investigation is concerned with the period known as "early adolescence" or those students who are aged around 10 to 15 years of age; in the middle years of learning (Chadbourne, 2003; Knipe & Johnstone, 2007; Pendergast, 2005).

In Australia there is a two-tiered education system that is traditionally known as primary (prep to year 7 in some states; kindergarten to year 6 in others) and secondary (year 7 to 12 in some states; year 8 to 12 in other states) (Barcan, 2007). Although this two-tiered education structure exists, various Departments of Education across the states and territories in Australia identify and support the need to recognise and address the unique nature of early adolescents with a focus upon middle schooling. This does not necessary mean the development of middle schools as seen in the United Kingdom and United States but instead, the embedding of middle years philosophies structures and pedagogies within state curriculum frameworks and policies. A number of middle years policies and action plans have emerged from state Education Departments such as Queensland (Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan, 2004), New South Wales (Our Middle Years Learners – Engaged, Resilient, Successful, 2006) and Victoria (Strategy for Reforming the Middle Years in Victorian State Schools, 2003) that outline timeframes for reforms and specific strategies to engage middle years learners. Of particular interest to this study is the recognition within these guides that tertiary education institutions need to prepare beginning teachers to teach in the middle phase of learning (Education Queensland, 2004).

The need to produce graduate teachers who are well-versed in middle years practices has emerged from concerns about the number of early adolescents becoming disengaged and "dropping out" of Australian schools. In addition, concerns are raised about absenteeism, late attendances, suspensions and expulsions, poor attitudes towards teachers and the

schooling system, classroom behaviour, substance abuse and unsafe sexual conduct, and low self esteem (Hill & Russell, 1999; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003). As Carrington (2006) states, adolescents are “seen as a risk” and “perceived to be at risk” (p. 27). In order to engage middle years students in these new times, education systems, schools and teachers must consider the diverse learning needs and characteristics of early adolescents (Carrington, 2004; Pendergast, 2005; Zevenbergen & Zevenbergen, 2007). Hence, middle schooling teacher education programs need to prepare graduating teachers so that they understand the growth and developmental issues that surround middle years learners as well as the pedagogical approaches that are most effective for engaging them.

Providing quality field experiences (practicum or professional experience) programs are well documented in reports on teacher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007; Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Ramsey, 2000). The in-school experience is where the preservice teacher makes the connections between what is learned at university and how it is practiced in the classroom. The opportunity to be in middle school classrooms not only allows preservice teachers to exercise and reflect upon noted pedagogical practices, but allows them to link theory with practice. Preservice teacher feedback also supports the importance of the learning that takes place during the field experience (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). Furthermore, Ramsey (2000) suggests to maximise preservice teacher’s learning, the field experience or school-based components of teacher preparation need to be linked to curriculum studies and theoretical university-based units.

With the two-tiered system in Australia and the notion that middle years encompasses grades 4 – 9 in some states and 5 – 10 in others (Knipe & Johnstone, 2007), middle years’ preservice teachers need to understand the pedagogical practices and school support systems available in both primary and secondary settings. It is therefore suggested that for middle school graduates to be fully prepared, teacher education programs need to provide preservice teachers with opportunities to teach in both secondary and primary settings so that a full understanding of middle schooling issues is understood. Indeed, this can present challenges given the expectations in many Australian schools that primary teachers need to be equipped to teacher across 6 to 8 key learning areas and secondary teachers require, in some states, two areas of specialisation.

A teacher’s perception of their confidence to teach has been directly related to their teaching ability in the classroom (De Nobile, 2007; Jamieson-Proctor & Finger, 2006; Ross, Kriever & Hagaboam-Gray, 1994; White, 2006). There is also evidence to suggest that teacher confidence is directly linked to student success and achievement in the classroom (Dawson, 2008; Pill, 2006; Ross, Kriever & Hagaboam-Gray, 1994). Perceived confidence or self efficacy is viewed as a person’s belief about their ability to produce a particular level of performance (Bandura, 1986). Bandura advocates that those people with a strong sense of confidence will experience human accomplishment, personal well-being and higher achievement. Self confidence or self efficacy to undertake a task is influenced by a person’s motivation, their experiences and their perceived skill and ability to successfully complete the task (Bandura, 1986). Teachers who are confident in the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge for teaching are more likely to be successful teachers (Murphy, Neil & Beggs, 2007). There is no one formula in developing the confidence of preservice teachers to teach successfully in the classroom. However, studies of teacher confidence (Dawson, 2008; De Nobile, 2007; Jamieson-Proctor & Finger, 2006; Pill, 2006; Ross, Kriever & Hagaboam-Gray, 1994; White, 2006) show that by assisting the development of a deep knowledge of

curriculum and pedagogy and the opportunity to practice the skills to achieve mastery, self confidence can be increased. It is therefore essential that providers of preservice teacher education programs consider the confidence of their graduates to teach to ensure there is maximum potential for them to be competent and successful classroom practitioners.

Aim of the Study

In order to develop and improve teacher education it is necessary to undergo reviews of programs to ascertain their effectiveness in producing quality teachers that are confident and competent to teach (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, Ramsey, 2000). This small-scale qualitative study investigated the responses of seven preservice teachers towards the completion of a four-year Bachelor of Education primary degree that included a middle years pathway or four elective units. The aim of the study was to investigate the final-year preservice teachers' perceptions of their middle schooling preparation, examine the strengths and improvements required in the course, and investigate their perceptions of their confidence to teach in the middle schooling context. By investigating their perceptions of their confidence to teach it would provide an indication as to whether the course had assisted the preservice teachers to become competent successful teachers (e.g., see Ross et al., 1994).

Context and Data Collection Methods

This study is set at a small regional campus that is part of a larger university in Queensland. In 2005 the Faculty of Education introduced a four-year Bachelor of Education (primary) to this newly established campus. To address Education Queensland's Middle Phase State School Action Plan that states "*Action 12: Negotiations with tertiary providers will be undertaken to review preservice and post-graduate provision for teaching in the Middle Phase of Learning*" (2004, p. 12) the Faculty decided that the preservice teachers would complete middle schooling electives with the core units being shaped to reflect middle schooling trends and practices. Faculty members noted that preservice teachers would graduate with a Bachelor of Education (primary) with middle years' pathway (or four middle years electives units).

Field experience programs were viewed as vital components of this course thus by the completion of their course these preservice teachers would have completed 100 days of in-school experience. Furthermore, the course was enhanced with greater time spent in schools that was linked to curriculum areas. For example, in the second year of the program the preservice teachers were placed in schools on the student free day in January and then completed one day visits each week throughout the semester culminating in a four-week block field experience at the conclusion of the semester. Further school-based experiences were added to core units such as Science and Physical Education and Health that meant as part of the unit delivery, preservice teachers had opportunities to teach science experiments and health and physical education classes to students in the middle years of learning. Preservice teachers were then involved in guided de-briefing sessions to assist them to reflect on their practice and make the links between university content and practical application.

School-based field experiences were also shaped to assist the preservice teachers to gain more experience with students in the middle years. As well as the usual primary field experience placements, preservice teachers were encouraged to complete a secondary placement.

Local schools were responsive and assisted with placements in years 8 and 9. To overcome the issues of subject specific teaching areas evident in surrounding secondary schools, the preservice teachers elected to teach in subjects they felt they had expertise or experience.

This study employed qualitative methods of data collection as it was investigating the perceptions of the preservice teachers (Neuman, 2002) towards their teacher preparation program and their confidence to teach. Seven of the twenty-two (four males and eighteen females) final-year preservice teachers volunteered to be involved in the face-to face in-depth interviews. This number represented 32% of the final-year cohort. Volunteer sampling was employed as it was convenient and meant the preservice teachers would be enthusiastic to participate (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The use of in-depth face-to-face interviews meant the researcher could solicit “additional information to fit the respondent’s replies” (Hittleman & Simon, 2006, p. 27). The 45-minute interviews took place at the campus at the beginning of the preservice teacher’s final semester. At this time the participants had concluded most of their course work with one unit and their final field experience and internship to be completed. The interview questions were constructed using the relevant middle years’ literature and the Queensland College of Teachers: Standards for Teachers (2006). The responses were collated for emerging themes by noting similarities in their responses (Cohen et al., 2007).

These preservice teachers volunteered for this study and were of varying ages and backgrounds. In 2005, when this cohort began their four-year degree, this regional campus attracted a large percentage of mature-age students who had previous life experiences including teacher aide work and other work experiences in varying employment. Indeed, five of the seven participants were mature-aged students. Table 1 below summarises the age and gender of those preservice teachers who participated in the interviews.

Table 1: Age and Gender of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age range in years
1	Female	40-45
2	Female	45-50
3	Female	20-25
4	Female	25-30
5	Male	25-30
6	Female	35-40
7	Female	20-25

Results and Discussion

The preservice teachers were asked to comment upon the experiences or units that had increased their confidence to teach in the middle years’ context. Three themes emerged from the seven participants. They indicated that the experiences that assisted in developing their confidence to teach in the middle years context were the field studies experiences, the middle years’ electives and the units that had school-based experiences. Participant 3 commented

that by completing the field studies (prac) unit she knew she could apply what she had learned at university.

I found that prac experiences have increased my confidence to teach middle years. My second prac was year four/five and at first I didn't know what to expect. They (the students) actually surprised me as to where they were developmentally. That really gave me confidence because I knew I could teach the students and apply a lot of what I have learnt at uni. (Participant 3)

The preservice teachers who completed field studies experiences in a variety of grade levels commented on the value of this experience in increasing their confidence to teach in the middle years context.

Initially I was more comfortable teaching the lower primary grades but after completing the middle years units and undertaking field experience with a year 7 class and then a year 8 class, it gave me the confidence to know that I have the knowledge and I can develop the rapport to teach students in the middle years of learning. It increased my confidence because I had the opportunity to gain experience and link what I had been learning at university to the classroom. It made me feel so good when I experienced that success. (Participant 1)

All seven preservice teachers noted the worth of the middle years' electives in increasing their confidence to teach in the middle years' classroom. Participants 6 and 7 (respectively) commented, "I think all the middle years' units were particularly useful in developing my confidence. I think that looking at the theory behind middle years is important to understand in order to be a successful classroom teacher" and "The specific middle years units offered a lot of insight into middle years' issues such as adolescent development, drop out rates, disengagement of students, brain development and the cognitive, social and emotional development of students in the middle years of learning. I really do understand that adolescence is a distinct time of development and the work of middle years' teachers is important if we are to keep these students engaged and motivated in the classroom".

Creating the links between theory and practice and the opportunity to teach were also seen as strengths of particular core units that were enhanced by in-school experiences. Furthermore, the pedagogical approaches of the university lecturers delivering the units were also seen as important in developing the preservice teachers' confidence. A typical response came from participant 5 who noted:

I think the Science unit assisted to build my confidence. Although not designed specifically for middle years you could still relate the theory back to the content of this unit. The processes that the lecturer took us through like the higher order thinking, integrated planning, engaging students in the classroom, real world experiences and the way he modelled the sorts of things we should be doing in our classrooms really developed my confidence. Doing the science experiments in the school also increased my confidence because I thought "hey I can do this" and I also reflected on what I could improve upon.

The preservice teachers also had the opportunity to comment upon the areas of their teacher preparation course that required improvement so as to better prepare them for teaching in

the middle school context. Two themes emerged from this question. First, there was a pre-service teacher perception that more time needed to be spent in schools. This theme was supported by 6 of the 7 students who noted that more in-school experiences linked to curriculum and middle years units would further improve their course, increase their confidence and better prepare them for teaching in the middle school context. Participant 7 commented:

I really liked the way we had contact with middle years students in schools during some of the curriculum units. I think this could have been enhanced even more so by attending more school visits that were linked to university units. Yes, more on the ground contact with students in the middle years of learning would have been good. Prac is good but by linking the visits to the university units helps us more readily link the concepts taught at university with the real classroom.

Participant 6 further stated:

It would be good if when we are doing MY units to undertake some weekly visits to make those links between theory and practice. When we made the visits that we did, it was all the theory, like what the school was doing to address middle years' students, however, it would have been good to experience it rather than just hear about it.

Participant 2 supported the suggestion that more time was needed in schools and stressed the importance of middle years preservice teachers experiencing both the primary and secondary school setting.

I think the biggest improvement in this course would be to get student teachers out there into the high schools and upper primary classrooms. Yes, get them out there. Most people have a fairly good understanding of the primary setting but the high school is a different environment and preservice teachers need to see and go into high schools to observe or even teach a couple of lessons and get to know about the backgrounds of the students and understand the nature of the communities.

The second theme that emerged was that some preservice teachers thought particular units and, in some cases, the course in general needed to be more practical and include more strategies for teaching. The views that represent the participants are expressed by Participants 3, 7 and 4 respectively:

Literacy could have been much more hands on – Science was good as it was hands-on – literacy was too theoretical. (Participant 3)

The visual arts unit in particular, was not practical enough. We needed to undertake more making and appreciating activities that were suitable to classroom practice. I could not see the relationship between what we did and its application in the classroom. (Participant 7)

I think the last four years could have been spent learning more about what to teach. I think the theory is important but there is an overabundance of theory and not enough emphasis placed on the strategies we need for teaching. (Participant 4)

Preservice teachers were asked to comment upon aspects of teaching in the middle school context where they felt most confident and prepared, to aspects where they lacked confidence and preparation. Table 2 below summarises the varied participants' responses.

Table 2: Preparedness for Teaching in the Middle School Context

Participant	Most confident and prepared	Least confident and prepared
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle years teaching philosophy • Teaching literacy • Locating information • Reflecting and improving upon teaching 	I feel I can overcome any lack of confidence or preparation
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing more about the theory of teaching middle years students than experienced teachers • Teaching mathematics • Teaching the arts 	Teachers who have been teaching for a long time not accepting new approaches to teaching middle years
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organising and monitoring group work • Teaching strategies that engage middle years learners 	The level at which to pitch lessons so it is relevant to the students
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing relationships with middle years students • Monitoring the health and wellness of the students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching literacy and numeracy • Classroom management
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding middle years learners' development • Developing relationships with middle years students • Reflecting upon practice to ensure improvement 	All of it - but I am ready to be out there
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching literacy • Teaching the arts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching in a secondary setting • Teaching science
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching SOSE • Teaching science 	Teaching literacy and numeracy

As can be seen from Table 4 the preservice teachers' responses were varied with no emerging themes. Two students noted they had confidence to reflect upon their practice and another

two noted they felt confident to teach in the Arts, while two other students noted they lacked confidence in literacy and numeracy. The preservice teachers were then asked how they would overcome any lack of confidence or preparation. The preservice teachers noted they would seek professional development and ask experienced teachers at their schools for assistance. Six of the seven participants noted they felt they would overcome their lack of confidence and preparation through practice. The responses below highlight the views of these preservice teachers.

Anything I feel I lack confidence in I will seek professional development or talk with my colleagues. I am a big one on professional development. I believe you can never have too much knowledge as often there is a different twist that your colleagues or a PD session will be able to suggest. (Participant 1)

I think I will rely on the teachers around me to assist in the areas that I do not feel confident. I will jump at any PD that may be available. (Participant 5)

I think the only way I can overcome any lack of confidence is by getting out there, experiencing teaching and through practice. (Participant 3)

Summary and Conclusion

The results indicated experiences that increased the preservice teachers' confidence to teach in the middle school context were: the field experience units; the middle years units; and units that included school visits or a practical component. The preservice teachers commented that the opportunity to interact with students and teach in middle years classrooms readily assisted them to "link the concepts taught at university with the real classroom". It was also noted that lecturers who modelled positive pedagogical practices and presented their units in a practical "hands on" approach also assisted to develop the participants' confidence to teach in the middle schooling context.

Suggestions for improvements in the course centred upon the need for the preservice teachers to experience more school-based activities. Even though this Bachelor of Education degree was enhanced with school visits, preservice teachers suggested that further school-based opportunities were necessary to increase the confidence and the preparedness of these preservice teachers. Further suggestions for improvements related to particular units that needed to combine theoretical knowledge with practical application.

Areas preservice teachers felt they were confident or lacked confidence to teach in the middle years context varied greatly between the participants. This may be as a result of the different life experiences that impacted upon their perception of confidence. In general, the preservice teachers indicated they were comfortable with middle years pedagogical approaches and certain key learning areas while their lack of confidence and preparedness ranged from concerns over being accepted by their peers, to the teaching of particular subject areas. Preservice teachers presented positive suggestions as to ways they would overcome their lack of confidence indicating they would seek assistance from more experienced colleagues and undertake professional development. They also noted that much of their lack of confidence would be overcome through their development as teachers and through classroom practice.

This research demonstrates the need for providers of preservice teacher education courses to conduct regular reviews to assist preservice teachers to graduate as confident and competent teachers. Preservice teachers can present important feedback as to what aspects of their course are valuable in preparing them to teach. The preservice teachers in this study confirmed the views of Ramsey (2000) and the Top of the Class Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007) that professional experience (practicum) and units with a school-based or “hands-on” approach can assist preservice teachers to make the links between theory and practice that can ultimately impact upon their confidence to teach. It is therefore imperative for providers of middle years teacher education programs to consider not only the content of units but also the nature of the professional experience and the pedagogical approaches employed in course delivery. Furthermore, academics designing units for such programs, should consider how they might best present the theoretical knowledge and pedagogical content of units so that they maximise opportunities for middle years preservice teachers to make the links between theory and effective classroom practices.

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